

## SEATTLE FIRE DEPARTMENT

### Information Bulletin #986



## Fire Evacuation Planning for low-rise buildings

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The following information is provided to assist in the development of fire evacuation plans for a wide variety of occupancies. If questions arise regarding specific procedures for your building, please contact the Fire Marshal's Office at 206-386-1337.

### Getting Started

#### ***Survey the building***

Determine what types of fire and life safety systems are present—including fire alarm system, smoke detectors, voice alarm system, sprinklers, fire extinguishers, manual pull alarms, and fire doors. If your fire alarm system is monitored, be sure to keep the name and phone number of the monitoring company available at the fire alarm panel. If you are not completely familiar with your fire alarm system or other fire protection features, contact your building management or a professional fire protection company to learn more about them. Survey the building occupants.

Does your building house a changing population, as in a retail store or restaurant, or will the building occupants be familiar with the facility? Note any special needs that individuals may have, such as non-English speaking or physical disabilities.

### Developing a Plan

#### ***Develop a floor plan.***

Design a basic floor plan for each floor of the building. On each floor, indicate the location of all fire exits, manual pull stations, and extinguishing equipment. Post the floor plan throughout the building. Mark YOU ARE HERE according to the location of the posted plan. Then, mark the two closest fire exits. Also, note that elevators must not be used as a fire exit.

#### ***Develop written procedures.***

This can be a simple flyer that you distribute to tenants, or a bound document that details the roles of staff and tenants during a fire emergency. This document should be readily available for building occupants and distributed to all new staff and tenants.

#### ***Assign a meeting place.***

Choose an outside location for occupants to meet after evacuating—at a distance from the building. In the event of an evacuation, this is a place to assemble and make a head count. The meeting place location should be far enough away from the building to keep individuals out of the way of fire fighting activities and away from falling glass and debris.

### Fire Alarm Response Procedures

#### ***Treat every alarm as an emergency.***

In every instance, if an alarm sounds, all building staff and occupants should react as though it is a real emergency.

A designated and responsible staff member should proceed to the fire alarm panel. Initial evacuation begins immediately upon alarm. Notify the Fire Department by calling 911. If available, trained building staff members investigate to determine the location of the fire, and take steps to extinguish it if possible.

When the Fire Department arrives, the Officer in charge takes command at the scene.

## **If the Alarm is False**

If building staff determine that the alarm is a false or nuisance alarm prior to the Fire Department's arrival, a call to 911 should be made and the information relayed to the Fire Department dispatchers. Upon instruction of the fire dispatcher, building personnel may silence the alarm. **DO NOT RESET THE ALARM!**

The Fire Department dispatcher will notify the fire companies in route to the building that a false alarm has been indicated. One fire company will continue to the building to verify that the alarm is false. All other fire department response will be cancelled.

It is extremely important not to reset the fire alarm when you believe an alarm is a false or nuisance alarm, until directed to do so by the Fire Department. If the alarm is reset prior to Fire Department permission, it may be necessary for the Fire Department to search the building completely to verify the alarm is false.

## **Procedures For Persons Unable To Use Exit Stairs**

### ***If You Can Move to the Exit and Have Persons to Assist You***

Move to the exit stairwell. Wait until all persons on the floor have evacuated and traffic in the stairwell has cleared.

If the stairwell is free of smoke, enter and wait in the stairwell landing. Two people should wait with you, while one person should inform the arriving Fire Department of your location. Make sure that the door is securely closed. Wait with your assistants for further instructions. The Fire Department will send fire fighters to assist you if evacuation is necessary.

If you are waiting in the exit stairwell and traffic builds from the evacuation of upper

floors, re-enter your floor to allow others to pass and the stairwell to clear. If there are too many individuals to wait on the landing, an area of refuge should be sought on the floor, such as an apartment or a room with a door, window and telephone. Use the fire survival skills described below.

Assistants should not attempt to carry you down the stairs unless conditions in the stairwell become threatening. If conditions deteriorate, the assistants can then perform a carry down the stairs to a safer area.

### ***If You Are Not Able to Leave the Floor***

If you do not have persons to wait with you, or are unable to leave your unit, refuge should be sought on the floor. Most appropriate would be a totally enclosed room with a telephone and window. This may be your apartment, or an office.

### ***Survival Rules For Sheltering in Place***

- Use towels or clothing to block openings around doors or vents where smoke might enter. Put a wet cloth over your mouth or nose.
- Place a signal in the window. The signal can be anything that will call attention to your location. For instance, tie the curtains in a knot.
- If smoke or fire enters your unit, call 9-1-1 to report your location. Stay low to the floor to breathe the best air.
- It is advisable not to open or break windows. Often smoke from the outside of the building can enter through open windows. Breaking windows will put you at great risk to smoke entering from the outside, and will hamper rescue efforts below.

## **Fire Drills**

In a fire drill, building occupants should duplicate as closely as possible the actions they

would take if a fire occurred. A log book, indicating the date, time and section of the building in which the drill is conducted, should be kept. If your building fire alarm is monitored, notify the monitoring company of the drill immediately prior to its occurrence. There is no need to notify the Fire Department.

Fire drills may be pre-announced to building staff or occupants, or they may be unannounced. Consideration of the building occupants and the use of the building may determine which type of drill is most appropriate.

### ***Critique your drill***

Check for the following:

- Building occupants could clearly hear and understand the alarm and any additional instructions.
- Evacuation was completed in an orderly and expedient manner.
- Floor wardens, if present, guided occupants to safety, completed floor check and reported to building staff upon completion of evacuation.
- Disabled persons were assisted
- Elevators were not used for evacuation.

### ***Establishing a Fire Scenario***

You may choose to designate a specific location for the "fire", and establish a scenario which would alter the basic fire drill procedures. It is best to attempt this type of drill after occupants have become familiar with their standard evacuation procedures. This type of drill may be more interesting to building occupants, as they have to make decisions when they encounter situations apart from the ordinary.

### ***Ideas for fire scenarios:***

- Post signs or locate building staff inside one of the exit stairwells to inform those attempting to enter that the stairwell is

blocked by smoke or flame and they must choose a different route.

- Designate individuals to wear signs indicating impaired sight, hearing or mobility which may require assistance from building occupants in an emergency. Other persons may be designated as non-English speaking and may require special instructions.
- Use a cardboard box decorated with red paper flames, or a flashing light, to indicate where the drill fire is located.

### ***Apathy or Lack of Participation in Drills***

There are some building occupants who continually refuse to participate in fire drills. Problems with frequent false or nuisance alarms in a building may make matters even worse. In most instances, the Fire Department cannot issue citations for failure to participate in a drill. Some help may be provided by contacting the Public Education Section to see if it may be possible to schedule a fire safety meeting for building occupants. However, those who are unwilling to participate in a drill are generally unlikely to attend such a program.

The Fire Safety Director's best tactic in gaining cooperation in drills is to try to explain the advantages of participation. Explaining that under real fire conditions evacuation can be considerably more complicated is one method. Informing employers that liability for their employees may increase if they do not allow or encourage participation in the drill may also influence them to participate. If a fire did occur and one of their employees was injured or killed, it is possible they may be named in some legal action because of their lack of support for learning fire safety procedures.

Making the drill more interesting by using a fire scenario, or checking to make sure the drill will be held at a convenient time, may yield better participation. Some buildings hand out candy to occupants as they leave the building to

go to their meeting place, to provide an obvious incentive.

## **High Rise Buildings**

Under the Seattle Fire Code, high rise buildings are required to submit a detailed Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) to the Seattle Fire Department. A high rise building is classified as any building that has occupied floors 75 feet or higher above Fire Department access. For additional information on developing or revising a high rise EOP, call the Public Education Section at 386-1337.

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